

# Heavy Alcohol Consumption and Spouse Abuse in the Army

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*Heavy drinkers are also at greater risk to perpetrate spouse abuse even though alcohol may not have been consumed prior to the abuse event.*

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Spouse abuse is an important, preventable health and social problem encountered among both civilian and military couples. Among military families, abuse not only causes extensive emotional and physical harm to the family members and the surrounding communities, but also may decrease mission readiness. Rates of abuse among military and nonmilitary spouses appear to be fairly comparable once differences in race, gender and other factors are taken into account.<sup>1</sup> However, specific patterns of spouse abuse and various risk factors, such as alcohol abuse and military deployments, are less well documented and understood.

There are both direct and indirect links between alcohol and spouse abuse. Heavy drinking has been associated with abuse events where the perpetrator or the victim (or both) have been drinking as well as with abuse where neither party has been drinking.<sup>2-4</sup> There are also indirect associations between alcohol and spouse abuse. Individuals with alcohol dependence might experience personality changes that increase risk for abuse even when they have not been drinking.<sup>5</sup> Research emphasizing the importance of typical drinking on the perpetration of spouse abuse suggests that couples with alcohol problems are more prone to conflicts with their spouses, but conflicts

that escalate to violence do not necessarily need to involve alcohol.<sup>6</sup> It may also be that heavy drinking covaries with other behaviors or social norms, such as lack of impulse control, aggression or gender models idealizing power.<sup>7</sup>

Alcohol abuse may not only increase the likelihood of abuse occurring, it may also result in more severe abuse. A study of 11,870 male, active-duty Army soldiers cohabitating with a partner on 38 US Army bases, found that compared to male soldiers who were mildly physically aggressive towards their partner in the previous year, male soldiers who were severely physically aggressive were more likely to report an alcohol problem.<sup>8</sup> A recently published study of the relationship between alcohol consumption and spouse abuse among enlisted, male U.S. Army soldiers found that soldiers who drink heavily are more likely to abuse their spouses both when they are and when they are not drinking alcohol.<sup>2</sup> A history of heavy drinking was also associated with spouse abuse even when drinking habits were measured years prior to the abuse. Put another way, women who live with heavy drinkers are more likely to be victims of interpersonal violence.

Participants in this study were all active duty, male, enlisted Army spouse abusers identified in the Army's Central Registry who had also completed an Army Health Risk Appraisal Survey between the years of 1991 and 1998 (n=9,534). Their data were compared with that of 21,786 controls who were matched on gender, rank, marital status and who had also completed an HRA.

This was a case-control study since the subjects were selected on the basis of the outcome (spouse maltreatment) and then differences in prior exposure (alcohol abuse) were examined. However, it is important to note that the key exposure data (alcohol consumption history) reported on health behavior surveys was measured prior to and independent of the spouse maltreatment event. This is an important strength of this study because the measurement of alcohol drinking behaviors was not influenced by the spouse abuse event as is possible during cross-sectional studies when both the outcome and the risk factor are measured at the same time.

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*Heavy drinking is associated with spouse abuse even when drinking habits were measured years before the abuse.*

Those who were classified as the heaviest drinkers, 22 or more drinks per week, were 66 percent more likely to abuse their spouses than those classified as abstainers. In addition, moderate (8 to 14 drinks per week) and heavy drinkers (15 to 21 drinks per week) were three times as likely, and light drinkers (1 to 7 drinks per week) were twice as likely, as soldiers who report they typically consume less than one drink per week, to be drinking during the time of the abuse.

The study's findings argue for early identification of heavy drinkers in order to provide treatment that may significantly reduce the consequences of the drinking, including spouse abuse. The findings also argue for further research between drinking and abuse, particularly for the relation between drinking, spouse abuse, and child abuse. While an abuse event may not be associated with alcohol misuse, careful exploration of an offender's history of drinking may also provide useful clinical material.

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